

## Making Plans

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I'm someone who likes to plan. I like to know what is happening from one day to the next, however varied in themselves those days might be, and I'm not particularly enthusiastic about surprises, except maybe the really wonderful ones, like the one inside our Christmas card in December 2016, with an accompanying photo, which read, *'Hi, I'm your first grandchild. I'm arriving in June. Surprise!'* There are few things which render me speechless, but that was one of them.

All through my life I've been a planner. From what I knew I wanted to do on leaving school and then university, to getting married and having children.

Most of us, it's fair to say, make plans. Plans about all sorts of things - how to spend our evenings, our weekends or where to go on holidays. Where we're going to live, whether to buy or rent. We plan our finances, how much we're going to save for a rainy day, how much we give to God's work in the church. But we don't always get it right (certainly I don't). But, it's not wrong to make plans. Indeed it's good to plan ahead. As is obvious from reading Genesis, it wasn't raining when Noah built the ark!

From our first reading, the writer of Proverbs says, *'To humans belong the plans of the heart ... Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and your plans will succeed.'*

Here, we see the key to success. Our plans should never be made independently of the Lord. We are called into relationship with him so our plans need to be aligned with his plans, and led by the Spirit. Because, you may find out, as I did, that God's plans for your life aren't always quite the same as yours. I'd fully intending continuing as a Social Work Manager to retirement, enjoying the increased leisure time that Martyn and I would have at weekends as the children began leaving home. God threw in the call to ordained ministry as an unexpected curve ball, something that certainly wasn't part of the plan. But more of that another time.

We see from our reading from Acts that Paul was also a planner. Today's reading begins, *'After all this had happened, Paul decided to go to Jerusalem, passing through Macedonia and Achaia. 'After I have been there,' he said, 'I must visit Rome also.'* He sent two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, to Macedonia, while he stayed in the province of Asia a little longer.'

Paul's vision, mission and plans revolved around the evangelisation of the whole known world. His strategy focused on cities: Jerusalem, Rome, Corinth and Ephesus. He spent a great deal of time in these cities preaching the gospel to as many people as possible, whether in the synagogues or in the lecture halls. But he was not unopposed.

Interestingly, in Ephesus the opposition was not about the nature of God or who Jesus was, but was economic. The silversmith Demetrius thought that he and other craftsmen would lose money as a result of Paul's preaching. If the people stopped believing in Artemis, and believed in Jesus instead, the demand for little silver shrines of Artemis would dry up, and there was a risk they'd all go out of business. So, he stirred up opposition.

But God also had a plan. Another proverb from today's first reading tells us that, *'The Lord works out everything for his own ends'*. In this instance, God worked through the city clerk. Even though he didn't seem to believe in God, his actions still stopped the riots and demonstrated that God often works through those who are not believers to achieve his plans.

There are lots of references in the Bible to plans. Plans that bring great hope to those in despair. Carried off into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon, after seeing the city and temple destroyed, the people of Israel seemingly have no hope, no future. And then a letter arrives from the prophet Jeremiah that tells them to build houses and settle down, to marry and have children and to, not only seek peace and prosperity to the city to which he's carried them into exile, but to pray for it also. And why? Because the Lord has a promise for them. A promise to fulfil a covenant made centuries earlier: *'For I know the plans I have for you,*

*'declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.'*

And Jesus' own coming was, of course, part of God's big plan: *'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.'*

It's becoming increasingly common that churches have plans too. They're often called Mission Action Plans or Development Action Plans. They're particularly encouraged in the Diocese of Ely, as they help meet its strategic aim for growth – by engaging with the needs of the community; growing God's church by finding disciples and nurturing leaders; and in deepening commitment to God through word, worship and prayer. You'll have heard me speak often about wanting *this* church – the church for Cottenham and Rampton – to grow in number, in faith and in how we serve our villages. Having a plan helps us to be intentional about that vision.

Much recent research into church growth concludes that it is those that intend to grow the church, who tend to grow the church (repeat). Churches are likely to grow *only* if they try to.

In a great book on church growth that I thoroughly recommend, the author Bob Jackson, compares some churches to the favourite teatime children's The Magic Roundabout, that ran from the mid-60s to the mid-70s.

Most of us are old enough to remember it well! A *'magic roundabout church'*, he says, is one that trundles thoughtlessly around the church's year. If it is Christmas, it will do Christmas, by which is meant repeating as exactly as possible what was done last year. The Bethlehem sheets will be located in the usual place, the same team will decorate the church building with holly, and the same carols will occur in the same order as usual in the various traditional services. When it is Mothering Sunday, the daffodils will be provided as normal, there will be three hours at the cross on Good Friday because that is what you are supposed to do, everyone will look after the same stall they always have at the Spring Fayre, and the Harvest Supper will be the usual Shepherd's Pie followed by Apple Crumble and Custard.

That's a bit of an exaggeration, I know, but I want you to get the point. There's nothing wrong in marking the church's year. It's what I love about the Anglican Church – the regularity and familiarity of the Christian calendar. The problem with endless repetition however is that the church's life isn't planned with the future in mind; it's composed of endlessly replicating the past. There's no need to make any decisions. Without strategy, without intentionality, without any debate about what might appeal to those not yet part of church, the younger generations with little experience of church life and even less knowledge of Jesus, the magic roundabout church goes through the

motions, its strength gradually waning, its numbers falling, and its relevance gradually disappearing.

It's not all doom and gloom though. Compare this with what Bob Jackson calls a *'gospel-train church'*, where members take stock of where they are, assessing what the church is like and what it does. Then they catch a vision of where they want to be – of what God is calling them to be and do. Once the gospel-train knows where it is and where it wants to get to, it will develop a travel plan. It will lay railway lines, get up a head of steam and move along intentionally to the destination.

The magic roundabout church goes round and round in ever decreasing circles but the gospel train church is travelling the line it is constructing into the future.

The reality is that many churches, including this one, have elements of magic roundabout and gospel train at the same time. Many of our traditions are important to us – to me, and to you. But there's also an excitement about the future and what that might look like. We have this new space and are excited about the possibilities it offers in how we do worship, but also how it can be a resource to our community, in providing space for events such as the concert last weekend. We're excited that, each week, God brings new people through our doors. We're excited that some of these are younger people and families, from generations currently missing from many churches across

the country. And we're excited by the possibilities that various legacies give us to think big about the future.

Today is our vision day, from 12 to 3 in the Church Hall, with lunch provided. If you haven't signed up, it's not too late, you can still come.

Come and help us take stock.

Come and catch a vision.

Come and sense where and to what God is calling us to.

Come and help us develop a travel plan for the future.

*'For I know the plans I have for you, 'declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.'*

Let's pray:

God of mission, who alone brings growth to your Church,  
send your Holy Spirit to give wisdom to our planning,  
wisdom to our actions,  
and power to our witness.

Help our church to grow in numbers,  
in spiritual commitment to you,  
and in service to our local community,  
through Jesus Christ our Lord,  
Amen.